

How Game of Thrones Made Me Appreciate Family Values

Don't read this if you haven't seen at least the full first season of Game of Thrones. You'll be completely spoiled.

"Let me tell you something about wolves, child. When the snows fall and the white winds blow, the lone wolf dies, but the pack survives. Summer is the time for squabbles. In winter, we must protect one another, keep each other warm, share our strengths." – Eddard Stark

Graphic violence. Excessive sexuality. Drunken brawling. Betrayal. Deception. Incest. Most people know *Game of Thrones* for these unsavory plot elements.

You wouldn't think a show like this would teach you to appreciate family values. But for me, *Game of Thrones* has probably done more to make me appreciate my teetotaling, conservative upbringing than anything produced by the purveyors of "family friendly" entertainment.

One of the main plots of *Game of Thrones* revolves around the fate of House Stark, a noble family in the cold north of the land of Westeros. The family is probably the most stable, loving family shown in the entire series. Hailing from a line of kings in a harsh, unforgiving environment, the Starks are salt-of-the-earth people who follow the traditions and customs of salt-of-the-earth people. They keep the old gods, they follow a strict code of honor, and they put a high stock on the wellbeing of their family members before just about anything else.

The conflict of the show develops as Stark patriarch Eddard Stark and his family are thrust into the conniving, backstabbing, treacherous political game of the other noble families, who are quite the opposites of the Starks. They are driven by a lust for power or a lust for legacy or just lust. That's where you get all of the objectionable elements I mentioned earlier. We step out of the Starks' safe family home into some very dark parts of the human heart.

The Starks are characters who struggle to do what's right in the face of so much evil. In Ned, Robb, Catelyn, and Arya, the show highlights the resilience that can come from a family's close ties. Through the crippling of a son, an attempted assassination, and a beheading of their father, the Starks remain loving, noble human beings. And while it's tempting to say that their own goodness makes them inept at understanding and

outwitting their enemies, it's undeniable that their family's values make them steadfast even as other noble families fall into strife and disarray.

It's also undeniable that the kind of family the Starks took for granted when they were all together in Winterfell is extraordinarily rare in the world of Westeros. How much of the gross injustice and self-destructive evil of the main players in this world simply wouldn't have come to be if people like Cersei, Jaime, Viserys, or Petyr were raised by Ned and Catelyn Stark? How long would any other family last if they had to experience the suffering of the Starks?

For all of the naivete, hidebound traditionalism, and unquestioned hierarchalism in the Stark value system, it is still able to raise human beings who were decent in a world that is anything but.

Game of Thrones may be a fantasy story, but its greatness comes from its moments of brutal realism. And the fact is that the Starks would be an exceptional family in this world as well. So many families are typified by backstabbing and abandonment and systematic abuse and infidelity.

I was lucky enough to avoid all of those in my upbringing. So I have to say the same to my family and its values that I would say to House Stark: well done. You have your faults and your blindnesses. Your conservatism and your religiosity, like any human inclinations, are only half-right half of the time. But you have succeeded in keeping a pack together. You have raised children with love. You have blessed your children and those around you with the example of good character, honesty, courage, generosity, and leadership.

We make mistakes, and we experience suffering like anyone else. We are prone to the same mistakes as anyone else. We go into a dangerous world that can often seem unfriendly to simple goodness. But our pack has good odds of survival. For that, we can thank the best within the values of our raising.

I was inspired to follow this line of thought by a recent spoiler-filled post on Reddit. The author writes a convincing argument that Ned Stark, despite losing his head, really wins the game of thrones in the end. I talk more about this argument in the last episode of my podcast *Game of Thrones Philosophy Breakdown*.